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RESEARCH ARTICLE

Shopping with violence: Black Friday sales in the British context

Abstract

This article argues that the 2014 adoption of the US shopping tradition of Black Friday sales to stores and supermarkets in the UK and beyond represents an important point of enquiry for the social sciences. We claim that the importation of the consumer event, along with the disorder and episodes of violence that accompany it, are indicative of the triumph of liberal capitalist consumer ideology, while at the same time reflect an embedded and cultivated form of insecurity and anxiety concomitant with the barbaric individualism, social envy and symbolic competition of consumer culture. Through observation and qualitative interviews, this article presents some initial analyses of the motivations and meanings attached to the conduct of those we begin to understand as 'extreme shoppers', and seeks to understand these behaviours against the context of the social harms associated with consumer culture.

Introduction

The Black Friday sales are an established date in the American calendar, occurring on the fourth Friday in November. The day after the Thanksgiving holiday, characterized by discounted consumer items is also the most valuable day for US retailers (Comscore, 2014). While a number of theories as to the origin of the term exist, the most likely explanation is that Black Friday refers to the first point in the financial year at which retailers begin to see a profit – in accounting terms moving from the red into the black, illustrating the importance attached to the sales by retailers. Although tentatively introduced in the UK in previous years by the larger American and US-owned stores and supermarkets, a more concerted and committed adoption blanketed online retail and real-world shops, supermarkets and malls in November 2014.

The UK incarnation of Black Friday sales is for researchers a distinct phenomenon, representing a clear shift from what has gone before. Of course, British consumers have queued round the block for new releases of mobile technologies (Williams, 2014), camped overnight for Boxing Day sales and are well used to scouring the Internet for Amazon 'lightning' deals or similar forms of scheduled, limited-time-only consumption. However, the chaotic scenes of shoving, trampling and fighting that emerged in several cities across the UK introduced to the United Kingdom a previously absent element of physically-realised violence to these temporally-orchestrated shopping events. Police were called to stores in Manchester, Cardiff, Newcastle upon Tyne, London, Dundee and Glasgow, among others, to deal with reports of violence and disorder (BBC News, 2014). While official statistics on arrests and injuries are elusive, Greater Manchester police confirmed making three arrests, with one woman suffering a broken wrist and head injury from a falling television during a confrontation (BBC News, 2014). In this article we argue that this very real and harmful violence is the physical manifestation of

a deeper symbolic violence that underpins, and is indicative of, the sharp end of consumer capitalism. These were not isolated incidences whipped into a moral panic by a hyperbolic media. We witnessed several exchanges of physical violence between customers in addition to abusive behaviour towards other shoppers and staff – none of which were deemed serious enough (or perhaps abnormal enough) to constitute arrest.

This article draws upon original qualitative research to explore the motivations behind some of those who opted to brave the crowds and go shopping, rather than - or in addition to - surfing the Web. We question the overly simplistic suggestion emanating from the majority of media outlets that those involved in the chaos and disorder of Black Friday UK 2014 were deviant; conveniently and simplistically described as 'yobs', 'thugs', or simply 'rotten apples' among the wider consumer population (Winchester, 2015). From the evidence presented here, it appears that the opposite is true: these are consumers who are *hyperconformist* in their unbridled adhesion to the central tenets of contemporary consumerism. It is imperative that in our analysis of the events and violence of Black Friday that we do not falsely conflate regulatory norms with culturally-embedded values (see Hall, et. al, 2008: 126-128). These were shoppers who, while breaking the social norms governing the fragility of non-violent pseudo-pacified relations in society (Hall, 2012), remained steadfast to the social and cultural values underpinning life in late-capitalism. It is important to remind ourselves here that immediately following bouts of aggressive, harmful, and violent behaviour, people were *paying* for their items and, of course, queuing for the privilege. Therefore, the willingness of individuals to engage in harmful behaviours, while conforming absolutely to the central convention of the shopping experience, demands greater interrogation in the context of a changing landscape of consumerism and social harm. Our position in the light of observational and interview data with Black Friday shoppers in the north-east of England is that these behaviours reflect the unadulterated triumph of liberal capitalist consumer ideology, and reflect underlying anxieties concomitant with the unremitting individualism, stimulation of envy and social competition of consumer culture.

Methods

Observation and qualitative interviews (*n*=27) were carried out in a major city in the north of England. We spoke to people inside and outside major retailers of clothes, electrical goods and large department stores, recording interviews on a handheld recording device. Due to the transitory nature of the sales and the way in which individuals were moving through the spaces occupied by Black Friday sales, it was impractical to hand out and expect completion of consent forms. These were determined individuals, intent on achieving immediate goals. Instead, verbal consent was recorded. The interviews were best described as opportunistic in nature, and averaged around 20 minutes in length. Our respondents varied in terms of age and gender, some were shopping alone while others were with family members or friends. The interviews themselves were semi-structured; we pressed individuals where possible on their motivations for entering into the fray and often used reference to their shopping bags as prompts to keep the conversation on track.

Due to the fleeting nature of the interactions and the shopping event itself, this piece of research cannot lay claim to being a definitive study of the complexity and social harms associated with consumer culture. The theoretical arguments made in this article are based on an extremely limited sample in only one city, but do illustrate a range of factors and issues that are worthy of more in-depth thought and further research.

Shopping and consumerism

Shopping is integral to what we have come to describe as consumer society, being irretrievably linked to presentation of identity and lifestyle. It promises to offer an unlimited choice of opportunity for self-gratification which, according to Zukin (2005), is one of the reasons it is so powerfully seductive. The very act of shopping itself is similarly powerful, with some research indicating that being seen to have shopped in a particular store can be a more potent status symbol than the actual ownership of the consumer item (see Hall et al., 2008). In this respect then, the sum of shopping is demonstrably more than its constituent parts of buying and owning. Furthermore, some commentators (Campbell 1987) have identified 'neophilia' as a defining feature of late modernity. The endless pursuit of the new is a vital component of capitalism, generating new markets phantasmagorically out of the old. The positive feelings (Tauber, 1972) associated with shopping, and the veneer of sociability that overlies such connected activities as 'going for coffee' at one of the myriad coffee chains located on street corners, suggest that we can view 'going shopping' as a leisure activity. To use the typology of Robert Stebbins (1997), shopping assumes the mantle of 'casual' leisure for most people, requiring little in the way of practice, expertise or specialized knowledge. We can also claim that the ready availability of credit through credit cards and pay-day loans ensures that it is a relatively inclusive activity, especially once we take into account the democratizing effect of the proliferation of designer outlet stores, which have had the effect of significantly broadening the demographic of those able to access 'designer' labels (Winlow and Hall, 2013).

Shopping in and of itself is worthy of detailed exploration. It is a practice both indicative and reflective of a range of social pressures and strains that constitute social life within late modernity. Fundamentally, shopping as an activity relies on the velocity of fashion (Appadurai, 1986) – the constant renewal of consumer goods within a marketplace - in tandem with a perpetual creation and re-creation of desire within consumers. As such it is vital for clothing, music, electronic items and so on to periodically fall out of fashion, to adhere to the life cycle of commodities which positions the new artefact as novel and desirable, a source of positive identity association and a lifestyle signifier. These attributes reflect on the individual, positioning them as 'admired and invited' (Bourdieu, 1984), before the items are identified as out of date, obsolete and in need of immediate replacement. For the individual, cultural irrelevance looms unless the latest models can be acquired and competently displayed.

A number of commentators have rightly acknowledged the changing landscape of the shopping experience, pointing towards the increasingly homogenized high streets, the ubiquity of online shopping and perpetual rationalization (Ritzer 1993; 2001). Online shopping in particular appears to have had a cultural and financial impact upon how purchases are made, with an array of online-specific sales and offers, such as the promotion of Cyber Monday (Swilley and Goldsmith, 2013). However, there is an aspect of the shopping experience that cannot be experienced through a click of a mouse or tap of the touch screen on a mobile phone. Despite the undoubted convenience of these online shopping experiences, which reduces search time whilst simultaneously negating travel and parking costs (Burke, 1997, Jarvenpaa and Todd 1997), there is something about the process of entering a shop and purchasing consumer goods that fleetingly connects at the heart of the postmodern subject. The shoppers we interviewed described the experience of shopping in-store in extremely affective terms, emphasizing the immediacy of being able to touch, feel, and even instantly use the consumer items they desired in ways that suggested the physical presence of the commodity had a seductive and alluring quality. When asked about why they chose to come out to the sales, Jackie, a 42-year-old caterer, and Toby, a 27-year-old in marketing, offered responses indicative of many shoppers' feelings about the embodied quality of shopping in-store:

Jackie: When I do me Tesco shop, it's all about getting it done quickly and out of the way. But it's more fun to come out and see all the things you could get. Being able to buy a pair of shoes and pick them up off the shelf. Feel them, look at the little straps and details. Try them on, imagine yourself in them. Gives you a nice feeling. You're a bit giddy really, so chuffed. Shopping online you're *hoping* they're as good as you imagined. But you have to wait for them to arrive instead of going home all pleased and getting them out the box again, trying them on.

Toby: It's just that you get it straight away. I bought a phone today. Didn't need one, but I went into the phone shop and just saw the new Samsung sitting there. Just looked so cool and sleek. Then I picked it up and held it in my hands and it just *felt* cool. So I bought out my contract and got it. No way would I have got it if I hadn't picked it up and flicked around with it a bit. Once I did that, it had the hooks in me.

Here we see how objects within this cultural sphere take on an almost mystical quality with their appeal and availability for immediate gratification acting as a 'siren song' for the overwhelmed consumer. Marx refers to this process as reification, but this concept does not quite convey the extent to which consumer objects have the ability to act as reflective mirrors of identity and distinction, temporarily staving off the anxiety of cultural obsolescence and for the individual providing a precious sliver of relational security, if only fleetingly. More evidence for this comes in the form of the young working class males that form the basis of Hall et al.'s research (2008), and again in the actions of individuals interviewed by Treadwell et al. (2013) in the wake of the 2011 riots. Here, individuals would sell stolen or looted goods in order to then access legitimate consumer markets, buying designer clothes, electronic items and accoutrements, finding meanings and cultural identity within the legitimate purchase of branded items. In this way they were able to elevate themselves above those who are unable to afford the genuine article and so buy knock-offs, and are able to inspire envy among those who recognize the difference.

Central to our understanding of the contemporary shopping experience is the proliferation of the 'non-space' with regard to consumer experience (see Augé, 2008). The non-space is encapsulated by the homogenized shopping experiences offered by the high streets of British towns and cities, but is perhaps even more neatly exemplified by the proliferation of the shopping mall, a relative newcomer to the consumerist landscape outside of the USA. Despite the highly polished floors and the painstakingly designed shop fronts, or the abundant opportunities for distraction and restitution through a bewildering array of hot drinks in franchised coffee shops, these are not joyful organic social spaces brimming with opportunities for interaction with social diversity in a 'cosmopolitan canopy' (Anderson, 2011). Rather, the surveillance cameras, security guards and uncomfortably contoured perches in these sterilized and visually open 'defensible spaces' constitute a spatial design which attempts to 'keep space to its specificity' (de Jong and Schuilenberg, 2006). There can be little doubt that here, the shopping mall is efficiently geared to the singular function of consumption. The overtly visible nature of these measures and the draining of any communal or social character from the shopping centre creates an asocial and individualistic spatial atmosphere which encourages a retreat from the social into the narcissistic consumer desires of the self (Raymen, 2015). These are spaces of physical transience bereft of any collective sociability, creating a habitus conducive or comfortable only to the individual willing to spend. The ubiquity of these dedicated consumerist spaces, when viewed alongside the commodified and homogenized night time economy and the increasingly corporatized and Americanized music and film industries, confirms the primacy of consumer capitalism. There is a suggestion that the societal impact of western culture's unswerving emphasis on and

commitment to consumerism – reflected in the design of the all-encompassing cosmos of the spatial – has had broad reaching effects on society and the dominant ethical norms, redefining:

> what is regarded as acceptable and unacceptable, proper and improper, legitimate and illegitimate, or praiseworthy and blameworthy behaviour in the light of the moral principles (e.g. justice … fairness, decency … authenticity, reliability) … changing the criteria by which people evaluate their own and each other's actions (Weigratz, 2010: 124).

In this way, we can view the apparently destructive, antisocial behaviours associated with Black Friday shopping as an *intrinsic externality* of the dominant structural and subjective driving forces behind the political-economic landscape of neoliberal society, and in this way entirely in keeping with or aligned to the everyday, law-abiding forms of consumption, credit and legitimized/sanitized incarnations of the consumer-finance economy (see Horsley, 2015).

Motivation

The reasons why people funnelled into supermarkets, shopping centres and stores in such numbers require exploration if we are to understand the broader cultural contexts in which these behaviours occur. In this sense, we can see shopping practices as inextricably linked to the peculiar pressures bearing down upon individuals today. The sales, special offers and 'unmissable' deals that litter our email inboxes, print and broadcast media are illustrative of the perpetual crisis evident in the 'real' economy (the sector that is concerned with the production and distribution of real services and goods, as opposed to the casino economy of banking and finance). Consumption is an essential component of the economy, with private consumption accounting for 64 per cent of GDP in the UK, and 67 per cent in the US (ONS, 2014). With so much invested in consumption, and the perpetuation of massive debt accumulation driven by wage compression for the majority, the global economy has the potential to be destabilized should the wheels of consumption grind to a halt, with epic recession or depression a real possibility (see Rasmus, 2010). The promise of a bargain, along with the anxiety associated with missing out, provide the system with the little jolts of energy needed to sustain forward motion in the shape of economic growth, while committed consumers are required to create the demand for the consumer goods that are so important to the fragile economy.

An endless supply of consumer-first subjects (Bauman, 2003) is maintained through a process in which anxiety and low self-esteem are cultivated and commodified within youth (Bakan, 2011). Central to this task are of course the advertising and marketing industries, denounced as predatory practices over a century ago by Thorstein Veblen (2007) [1899]. In this way, the market is essentially tasked with both producing the supply and cultivating the demand to maintain favourable and steadily increasing economic growth (see Harvey, 2010). Today, the creation of hyper-sexualized scripts for marketing a range of products from thong underwear, padded bras, and cosmetics to children as young as five seems to illustrate this point. These practices are widely viewed to be linked to an array of harms to girls and young women; a lack of body confidence, eating disorders, shame, anxiety and unhealthy sexual attitudes and practices that are likely to last into adulthood (Bakan, 2011). At the same time that they are besieged by materials depicting unrealistic body ideals, children are also aggressively marketed junk food and unhealthy lifestyles. In the US alone, an estimated $4.2bn a year is spent on advertising high sugar breakfast cereal, sugary drinks and fast food through a range of media outlets, sponsorship of sports teams and music events that target a youthful audience (Bakan, 2011). Of course, the advertising industry does not solely concentrate on children and young adults. By commodifying the symbolism of youth, we can witness an industry selling adult identities to children, while at the same time pushing infantilizing consumer identities onto adults in a consumer culture where

youth and the appearance of youthfulness are directly linked to vitality, sex appeal and the somewhat amorphous concept of 'cool' (Hayward 2012; Smith, 2014).

While the marketing industry is essential in the creation of new and continuing demand for a range of easily accessible and discardable consumer identities, it also plays an important role in creating and maintaining a generation of disaffected, post-political subjects. Traditional forms of identity – those rooted squarely in social class and a communal recognition of exploitation and class struggle – are discarded and replaced with 'the deracinated, depoliticized and cosmopolitan subject of consumerism' (Hall, 2012: 375). We can be in no doubt that consumer culture has succeeded in addressing the very anxieties that it creates. This is a process that is broadly presented as democratic, giving the entire population not only *what* they want, but anything they *could* want. A consumerist playscape is created where all are invited and where, thanks to the proliferation of mass-manufactured and mass-marketed consumer objects, affordable luxury is within the grasp of all consumers who are able to creatively craft unique identities through skilful manipulation of symbolic consumer items in the sign-object system. This is a system with the potential to generate anxiety, inadequacy and a sense of isolation should individuals be unable to competently operate within circuits of ornamental consumerism.

While it is tempting to discuss the motivations of the Black Friday shopper as rooted in relative deprivation, this perspective is inadequate. Our interviewees did not perceive themselves as being deprived or excluded. Rather the deals and savings offered by the Black Friday sales enable individuals to demonstrably advertise their *inclusion* through the symbolic value attached to the majority of items included in the sales. Any sense of deprivation is therefore not attached to the object itself, but rather the identity or *potential-for-identity* that the products may bestow. Nik, a 22-year-old student and local bartender, utilizes a slogan-like description of 'update yourself' to depict the power of potential identity and identity deprivation quite explicitly:

> People are getting crazy because it's an opportunity to update yourself. Like a *real* opportunity, where you can afford it. You know how it is. You look at your wardrobe and you don't want to wear anything. You want to feel different, change your look. Otherwise it gets stale, you kind of fade because you just always look the same. Same shirt, same phone, same gear. You know when you get a new phone, or a nice pair of shoes or a flash bit of jewellery. You feel proppa fresh. Just have that confidence, you know you look good. You just feel it and it changes everything.

Our observational work around the shopping centres and supermarkets of the city suggested that the vast majority of the products on sale under the Black Friday banner were 'positional' items (Hirsch, 1977) – televisions, trainers, clothing and so on, which promise or signify a position of social distinction within a symbolic order that recognizes and reflects the narcissistic relation to consumer culture as freedom, creativity and success (Smith 2014; Hall et al., 2008). While the democratizing effect of mass consumerism is often portrayed or understood as a social 'good', an unproblematic route to inclusion and reflective of equality in times of rising inequality, the reality we would suggest is somewhat more insidious. The circuits of self-expression and attendant consumer markets serve to aggravate the anxieties and social divisions that emerge from relentless social competition and aggressive comparison (James, 2010). These were not individuals who felt 'deprived' or inferior in relation to those who 'had' the items they desired. On the contrary, the shoppers we spoke to desired those items that reflected their personal sense of superiority over the 'herd' of the general population from which the 'cool individualism' of consumer culture teaches its subjects to be different (Hall et al, 2008).

Here, we are not denying the human capacity for creativity, nor negating the existence of an underlying desire on the part of individuals to attain freedom. However, as Hall (2012: 379) suggests:

> We are … driven by our material nature to be free, but becoming so is still an extremely difficult task; so precarious, traumatic and daunting, that it can be hijacked by fake ideologies that offer comforting alternatives.

In this sense then, we should not underestimate the power of ideology in creating a comfortable homeostasis in which nothing has to change. As Fisher (2009: 8) points out, the dominant ideology is characterized by a state of capitalist realism, a doxic acceptance of capitalism as the only option, which 'seamlessly occupies the horizons of the thinkable'. The 'capture' of the individual by the ideology surrounding consumer capitalism is essential in propelling the individual into a social order dominated by the assiduous acquisition and display of cultural symbols and artefacts.

Missing out

An unwavering adherence to consumerist ideology recurred throughout discussion with our respondents. Several referred to an insistent fear of missing out, were they to deny availing themselves of the opportunity that presented itself. Emily, a 26-year-old administrative assistant, captures this palpable anxiety here:

> I think people would just feel like they're missing out, so they get crazy. I mean they're being pricks, but I don't properly blame them because they don't wanna lose out. Like I'm dead chuffed I got this for that price [Holds up bag]. Proper buzzing. But I'd be feeling equally shite if I hadn't been able to.
>
> You also want to have the stuff your mates have, you kind of bond over it. You get left out if you don't have the new phone or the new iPad or the new TV package, yeah? It's the same reason people bond over music and that or what they watch on telly. So we all wanna be here …

The source of this anxiety cannot be reduced to a vague desire to be 'involved'. Rather, it is indicative of a much broader sociocultural process that has penetrated the late-modern individual's subjectivity, characterized by what Slavoj Žižek (2002) describes as a reorientation of the cultural superego. For Freud, the superego was responsible for inducing a savage form of guilt associated with the pursuit of pleasure and giving into the base desires of the id. Today, we are more likely to feel guilty at our failure to avail ourselves of opportunity. Missing out is likely to evoke the feelings of guilt and shame that would more traditionally be associated with giving in to the desires of the id. For Emily then, the inability to flaunt her competence, her savvy within the competitive consumer marketplace is a source of anxiety.

For some consumers, such as Keith, a 32-year-old doorman at a number of local nightclubs, Black Friday offered an opportunity to dip into new markets, purchase the indicators of social capital synonymous with formal modes of dress rather than jeans and T-shirts.

> I'm a scruffy bastard. But I like to think that maybe I'd be the kind of bloke that'd wear a suit. Kind of change my style and that. Wear nice clothes and that, smart like. Not just jeans and a T-shirt like I usually do. I was in that mode when I was in there y'know? I wasn't getting the stuff I usually get. I mean I got some of that. Sensible. Get some

> new clothes that you going to wear. But I was more imagining meself in these other clothes. Thinking like 'Oh that's proppa smart'. Y'know? That's what I was thinking about so I picked it up ... Just like you wanna change it up and be a different person you know. If there's ever a day to do that it's when the deals are on y'know? I've been thinking about it for a while like, but stuff always gets in the way you know. And you can't buy the lot because it's too expensive.

While some commentators (Hall, 1988; Fiske, 1991) may offer a rather celebratory interpretation of Keith's desire to transform himself through participation in the market, a feat only achievable thanks to the sheer variety of consumer choice, others rightly highlight the trivial, transitory and superficial nature of these circuits of consumption:

> The idea that 'you can be anything you want' … has come to mean that identities can be adopted and discarded … But if choice no longer implies commitments and consequences … the freedom to choose amounts in practice to an abstention from choice (Lasch, 1985: 38)

The very fact that we have no choice but to choose (see Giddens, 1991) suggests that making choices has become mandatory – which is, to say the least, a peculiar form of freedom. Therefore, to ally consumer choice so closely to freedom is a mistake. The choice is simply to choose from one of a set array of options, rather than the unfettered freedom that is implied through much of the literature and rhetoric. As Bauman points out:

> Individual choices are in all circumstances confined by two sets of constraints … One set is determined by the agenda of choice: the range of alternatives which are actually on offer. All choice means 'choosing among', and seldom is the set of items to be chosen from a matter for the chooser to decide … [the second set of constraints] is determined by the code of choosing: the rules that tell the individual on what ground the preferences should be given to some items rather than others and when to consider the choice as proper and when as inappropriate. (1999: 72– 73)

Bauman is not alone in dismantling the assertion that consumer culture is a breeding ground for creativity and freedom. Heath and Potter (2006) reveal the individualized identities manufactured and presented by the advertising and marketing industries have more in common with the barbarian mentality espoused by Veblen than the carefully cultivated images and lifestyle that reflect upon the competent consumer, driven by a form of perpetual motion engendered by the oscillation of artefacts between cool and uncool. For Veblen (2007; Mestrovic, 2003) individual distinction is achieved through self-aggrandizement, a desire for admiration and the need to cause a sense of envy in others through violent and antisocial means. In order for one person to feel attractive, others must be deemed ugly; for one to be sophisticated, others must be denigrated as common. It is this process that lies at the heart of the overt instances of acquisitive violence and aggression that dominate scenes in the shopping centres and supermarkets on Black Friday.

Impulsive purchases

For the most part, our respondents tended to admit to a degree of impulsivity when making purchases in the chaotic environment of the Black Friday sales. Retailers of course would characterize this as a success, as vindication of the hard work and business psychology behind the careful arrangement of products, the advertising and the planned route on which shoppers are led round the store (Desrochers and Nelson, 2006). However, the impulsive purchase is more likely to be bound in the complexity of consumer society where the

gratification and temporary enjoyment drawn from making a purchase is an integral driver to consumer behaviour. In the absence of the symbolic efficiency that provided a degree of certainty and security to underpin social identity and community throughout modernity, moral relativism and the assertion of calculative advantage do little to address the anxieties and nagging doubts that lie at the centre of the human subject.

While most respondents admitted to making impulse purchases, Keith illustrates what appears to be an irrational desire to purchase new items, to accumulate more.

> I got some jeans, got a few nice shirts for going out and that. Think I got some new shoes. But I don't really know how I ended up with three bags! [*Laughing*] Don't really know what I've got in there …. Hang on, let me find the receipt and I'll have a look.
> [*He fiddles around in his pockets for the receipt, finally checking his bags*]
>
> You just kinda walk 'bout and keep seeing things. Deals like. And you think 'Oh that's not bad!' and you pick it off the rack like. And you keep doing it. And everyone else around youse is doing the same and you end up with this.
> [*Keith rummages through his bag*. *He pulls out a wallet and a Christmas jumper*]
>
> See what I mean? Just grab stuff.

The form of impulse buy that Keith appears to be prone to lies at the heart of the success of Black Friday sales, at least as far as the retailers are concerned. From a marketing perspective, the headline deals aim to get bodies through the door – a small number of loss-leaders are offset against the purchases made subsequently on their orchestrated journey around the store. When the bargains are gone, the shopper's eye is drawn to a more expensive alternative. The association of shopping with positive feelings increases the possibility that something, *anything* will be bought in its stead. The motivation to keep consuming, to endlessly keep moving with the tide of consumer culture appears irresistible – unsurprising, given that the alternative is a form of ontological irrelevance for individuals unable or unwilling to display competence in the circuits of consumption.

In an attempt to mitigate these pressures, individuals have to constantly be on the lookout for new experiences, products and goods, new identities, new emotions and even new relationships. These committed consumers are perhaps best described as neophiliacs (Campbell, 1987) or in Bauman's (2001) terms 'sensation gatherers'. For Bauman, as for Žižek, the pursuit of the new is bound up with a range of emotions. These new citizen consumers are characterized by impulsivity, narcissism and an unabated sense of dissatisfaction, a nagging feeling that something is missing (Winlow and Hall, 2009). Involvement in Black Friday shopping provides a break from the workaday monotony of everyday life. In the context of this sense of lack, consumer items promise to fill the void, and Black Friday, in combination with easily accessible forms of consumer credit negates any lingering attachment to the notion of deferred gratification. In this sense to not buy anything in the sales would be unthinkable, a wasted opportunity, even a source of anxiety. It is this moment, (the unbridled opportunity to acquire consumer items that discern the individual as a competent consumer, in possession of a cool, individualized identity) that takes precedence over anything that has come before or that is to follow. David Harvey captures the essence of this when he suggests that:

> The immediacy of events, the sensationalism of the spectacle … become[s] the stuff of which consciousness is forged. (1989: 54)

The Black Friday sales offer a level of unparalleled immediacy for the shopper consumer – beyond that even of the next day delivery promise of Amazon Prime and other online retailers. The need to wait in order to replace consumer items and positional goods is nominally removed by the seductions of the grab-it-while it-lasts psychopathy of Black Friday. Violence and disorder associated with the US Black Friday shopping experience featured heavily in news reporting in the days leading up to Black Friday UK, and were paramount in any Internet search. Social media too played an important role, with Twitter feeds and Facebook pages creating a sense of suspense and expectation in the consumer. And of course the sight of cars and bodies laden with the spoils of the sales served to create a sense of missing out on the part of even the most casual observer.

In the context of Black Friday shopping, consumerism takes place within a social structure that rewards rather than sanctions the behaviours and actions that were widely reported in a way that denigrated those taking part. In this sense, the scenes of violence and disorder have to be contextualized against structural and symbolic forms of violence that permeate the shopping experience and society more broadly. Systemic violence is that 'inherent in the social conditions of global capitalism' (Žižek, 2008: 14), which remains invisible in comparison to subjective forms of violence – those forms of violence with a discernible victim and perpetrator. The structural forms of violence embody forms of conduct which are often 'socially permitted, encouraged or enjoined as a moral right or a duty' (Scheper-Hughes and Bourgois, 2004: 5). The systemic violence is embedded and naturalized through a range of media and marketing messages. Black Friday itself in its US incarnation is already familiar to UK consumers through conventional news media, but also through social media and American imported TV series, as Kate identifies here when describing how she is looking forward to witnessing the subjective violence that has become synonymous with Black Friday:

> I saw a South Park episode mocking Black Friday. Then I actually watched some real videos about Black Friday and realized it wasn't that far from the mark. So I can't wait to see it.

Spectacle/event

Like Kate above, a number of respondents indicated that a key motivation for attending the Black Friday shopping sales lay in the consumption of the event as spectacle. The image loops on news media and YouTube videos prepared and seduced in equal measures. For some the visceral thrill of the possibility of violence served to diminish any stigma associated with being a group of males engaged in a traditionally female-dominated leisure activity – that of a shopping expedition, as the following excerpt from Keith illustrates:

> Me and me mate Stef work evenings right and James is a student so he doesn't work. So we all got together down Spoons [JD Wetherspoon, a pub chain] nice and early for a breakfast and that. Then had a few beers to get a bit merry before coming in. And like we planned out where we wanted to go … just a day out isn't it? Like when you go to watch the football, you get down the pub early, get a few in like before you go to the ground. Have a few beers with mates, get a bit merry and that, makes the whole thing better—

James continues the story:

> Yeah we made a day of it. Got a bit pissed and come down here and see what all the fuss is about. None of us had been and it's like a big deal now over here. A thing everyone does and that and you see it on the news so thought we'd get involved.
>
> It's kind of like when you go to a club. Going into a club sober is horrible. All the people acting like idiots. Everyone is off their heads. You kind of need it to fit in. Having a bit of a buzz on made it all much better. Usually I hate crowds, but after a few beers in and it was actually a laugh, like dealing with all the shit and the people and all that was better than anything I actually got.

Keith and James appear to be creating new leisure opportunities by combining their Black Friday shopping with visiting a pub and drinking alcohol. In this way, the gendered associations with shopping and in particular Christmas shopping – that is, that women are socialized to take the tasks associated with shopping and gift giving more seriously than men (Fischer and Arnold, 1990), are mitigated by the visceral aspects of the events that have more in common with the organized disorder of the night time economy than the mall or supermarket.

The sense of event created by the marketing around Black Friday – the widely publicized deals, the early opening hours, the limited one-day only prices engendered a palpable anxiety among our respondents of an opportunity to be a part of something passing them by:

> Kate: I kind of get it, I think. Like it is crazy, but I think it's just an opportunity. People don't wanna miss out. Like we don't even wanna buy anything but we're still here. It's just a thing. The news and that and Twitter have been making a big deal out of it. It's almost like a really good party and you don't wanna be the only one who didn't go … I can't wait! So many people are already here. I've always seen the videos and heard about it and stuff, but where I'm from, it's only a small little town so it's not as crazy.

For some, the promise of violence, the opportunity to be on the periphery of something exciting was part of the draw

> Stephanie: I've come here to see people fight. It's so funny. Especially watching the staff just dreading their lives. It's kind of a guilty pleasure. Like watching Jeremy Kyle. Except I'm not that guilty about it [*laughs]*. Just watching people lose their minds is hilarious. We're totally gonna stir it up though, Like get in there and just start pushing and that, reach for things that other people are trying to get, start a tug of war and just watch them implode! [*Laughs*].
>
> Kate: Yeah. Just like, be part of it. I don't really want anything either. Just like watching how people act and that and like, getting in there. Like, I remember watching the riots and thinking it looked so fun! I would've definitely joined in with that.

For Kate, it appears that memory and the sense of having previously missed out on an unparalleled consumerist event in the London riots of 2011 (See Treadwell et al., 2013, Moxon, 2011) has caused a lingering sense of regret, which can be assuaged through a renewed opportunity for disorder and consumption. The importance of memory in subjective experiences is worth developing in more detail here. As Bauman (2003) has noted, biography and identity are no longer ascribed to the individual, but must be pursued, earned and displayed in the main through the acquisition and display of consumer goods and experiences. As such, it becomes a task, with responsibility for success or failure placed

firmly in the lap of the individual (Beck and Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). In this way we internalize a missed opportunity to engage in experiential markets as a lost opportunity to engage in the hedonism that is for many viewed as a compulsory part of consumer culture. The UK riots and the attendant looting of 2011 represents one of these missed opportunities for Kate and others who drew the same parallel throughout the research, and as such exists as a memory which impacts the behaviours of some individuals with respect to Black Friday shopping. For Walter Benjamin (1999) a critical re-reading of biographical history is viewed as a 'technique of awakening' which allows the individual to take control of a memory. Winlow and Hall (2009) develop this concept to explain the way in which violent men view and act within new social interactions as a way of taking control of memories of past situations in which they have experienced humiliation, a cathartic process that resituates the previous failing. It is not too much of a leap to adhere this process to Kate's self-admonishment for having missed out on the opportunities offered by the period of looting associated with the riots of 2011. Her regret around not being involved in this free-for-all is bound up with the imagining of *what might have been*, the image loops of mainstream and social media displaying individuals and their 'hauls' of consumer items, clothing and electronic goods that were obtained for free, simply by turning up.

The role of social media is important in displaying to others that you were there, that you were part of an important event, and you have a story to tell. The necessity to document experience in this way is exemplified by Sunjay, who states:

> Like, it's all about the experience innit? That's why I came. So I guess people wanna like put their videos up on Facebook and Vine and that. Make sure you don't miss the carnage and see who can get the best video.

This kind of behaviour was reflected in all the big crowds and store openings. The desire to not just be involved in the consumption of goods, but the consumption of the event actively contributed to the disorder. In all the instances of violence we witnessed, there was an attendant surge of people pushing, shoving, and sometimes fighting in an attempt to get the best vantage point.

Conclusion

The question as to whether Black Friday constitutes a permanent addition to the shopping and sales calendar in the UK is perhaps best answered by the websites of the major retailers involved in 2014. Pages were almost immediately updated, and web-page placeholders uploaded promising of more deals, lower prices, and offering myriad ways to stay in touch through a range of online communication routes. Whether or not we witness the same forms of violence and disorder to the same extent in the future is of course unknown. However, we would tentatively claim that the data presented here suggests that this would be a strong possibility. The ritualistic planning associated with Black Friday shopping illustrates perhaps the confirmation of the event as Event, a competitive arena in which success is measured through competence in the marketplace which in turn is illustrated through the bulging shopping bags, the dented credit cards and the 'war stories' familiar from other consumer markets such as the night time economy.

In this article we have positioned the importation of Black Friday from the US into the UK as indicative of the cultural dominance of consumer capitalism and its chief behavioural characteristic of narcissistic individualism. Arguably, the market's primary victory has been the generation of cynicism towards forms of collective identity, increasingly positioning them as

oppressive burdens on the individual's life project, while at the same time offering a range of alternative and easily attainable lifestyles, all of which are buttressed by global economic shifts which have changed the nature of work, politics, social class and community. However, while this consumer-based individualism has been celebrated as a liberating opportunity by some, this paper has argued that this set of conditions merely contributes to the late-modern subject's increasing entrapment in the superego's command to enjoy above all else, compulsively perpetuating the anxiety-inducing cycle of consumption and discarding. We need to continue interrogating the meaning and motivations of the practice of shopping and consumption within the historical, political, economic and cultural developments that surround it if we are to provide critical accounts of the predictable violence that is likely to feature at such consumer events in years to come.

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